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ABSTRACT

The impact of testing and promotion standards on students in urban schools was discussed by urban school superintendents from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Pointing to research that suggests that standards alone are not enough to boost achievement, many educators recommend coupling more rigorous standards with appropriate remedial programs, staff development, and additional school resources. Both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have had standards and standardized-testing programs since the late 1970s. In Pennsylvania student performance is compared with statewide norms through a testing program called the Educational Quality Assessment. In New Jersey, student performance is measured with a state-developed test, the Minimum Basic Skills Test. Superintendents acknowledged that standards have great implications for remediation and potential dropouts. There was near consensus that helping students meet new standards will require strong commitments by all educators, as well as training for teachers. That urban and suburban results will be different must be acknowledged in any comparisons that are published. Recommendations were developed for standards of promotion and testing. An appendix summarizes trends in areas other than basic skills in Pennsylvania. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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THE URBAN SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENTS
OF
NEW JERSEY

POSITION PAPER #6

THE IMPACT OF TESTS AND PROMOTION STANDARDS ON URBAN SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

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TESTING AND PROMOTION STANDARDS: THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS, SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Introduction

Mass public education has created pressure on educators to make learning effective and efficient for a large and diverse student population and to make schooling consistent with a fundamental American value--that rewards come from individual effort and ability. One result of these two, often conflicting, demands has been the installation of standardized educational requirements, promotion policies, and tests that measure levels of student learning.

Today promotion standards and testing are a basic component of America's educational system. They provide the criteria most Americans use to evaluate their schools. In a 1984 Gallup poll, declining test scores such as those reported for the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the California Achievement Tests, helped prompt half of us to give our schools a grade of "C" or lower. They also contributed to our picking of "poor standards" as the third most serious problem for public schools.

Purposes of Testing and Promotion Standards

What purposes do testing and promotion standards serve in our schools? First and most obviously, tests measure how well students are doing in relation to other students (norm referenced tests and standards) or in relation to some agreed upon standard (criterion referenced tests and standards). In either case, tests and standards identify successful students--those who make the grade. They also identify students who are not so successful -- those who don't make the grade. Third, testing and standards identify successful or not-so-successful programs and teachers.

In some states, testing and standards have been used to grade schools and school districts, presumably to determine how well their students are being educated.

Advocates of rigorous standards and tests usually voice their support in a context of improvement. For them, the goal of testing and standards is to make things better: to help schools and school districts identify where they are weak so they can strengthen their programs and be more effective. Few will dispute the value of this goal, but most of us recognize that the realities of testing, promotion standards and school evaluation raise a number of sticky issues. As with many other educational policies, there can be associated costs and, in some cases, these costs may equal or outweigh the gains.

Issues of Testing and Promotion

Foremost among the issues associated with testing and promotion are those that relate to the identification of successful (or unsuccessful) students. It is widely known that standards for promotion vary, even within a single school. Moreover, there seems to be a high likelihood--and some research evidence--that the standards applied vary even among students taught by a single teacher. So, in effect, students' success can become a matter of judgment on the part of teachers, administrators, or whoever interprets the standards. There are arguments for and against the desirability of allowing such variance; but the result of allowing too much of it seems to have been a loss of public confidence in public schools. For example, employers (including the Armed Forces) give their own placement tests because they don't trust the high school diploma. Colleges often

give basic skills tests of their own, and in some schools, tests have become the focus of affirmative action suits because they have been judged to be culturally biased.

The latest response to this falling level of public confidence is the formulation of policies intended to standardize the standards. These efforts, meeting with mixed results in different places, have put yet another important issue--retention/promotion policies--into the spotlight. This issue is one of social versus merit promotion. Should students be promoted only if they meet the standards and retained if they do not? Should they be promoted automatically as they grow older? Or should they be promoted only if they make significant progress in the opinion of their teachers?

Research findings are mixed on this issue, with most experts being of the opinion that:

- the debate is based on competing value positions more than anything else;
- that social promotion is not necessarily harmful;
- that merit promotion is not necessarily helpful; and
- that retention is of little benefit if a student merely repeats the same program.

Yet some schools that have set uniform promotion standards have reported increases in achievement.

This brings us to another major issue associated with testing and promotion standards: the identification of school deficiencies and the improvement of educational programs and staff. At the heart of this issue is the question, "Are programs and staff being identified for improvement... or for blame?" Teacher associations and labor groups are extremely fearful

of the latter, of course, and have been nearly unanimous in their opposition to standardizing standards and tests. The major objections to uniform standards and tests not only by teachers but also by many other educators include the following:

- Learning and achievement are complex--complex enough to defy most generalizable analysis. This complexity suggests, and research confirms, that there are many factors contributing to achievement. Teachers and programs are only two. Standards and testing tend to zero in on school related factors to the exclusion of others and, therefore, tend to put the blame on teachers and programs when other factors may be responsible for low achievement.

- Over emphasis on testing and standards leads schools to goal imbalance. Areas of learning that are not associated with the standards and tests become de-emphasized, perhaps dropped entirely. For example, the recent emphasis on basic skills has led to cutbacks in school time allotted to science, social studies, art, and so forth.

- Student gain is the critical issue. Evaluations that use absolute levels of performance on tests are unfair because, typically, students learn at different rates and begin with different levels of readiness. Schools and students should be judged on the amount of progress shown.

- Other than to earmark students as failures, tests and standards have little benefit. Most cannot identify specific reasons for poor performance -- poor curriculum, poor teaching, poor diet, poor learning environment, poor rostering, etc. And most include little in the way of guidance for remediation.

- The standards and tests used to gauge students achievement are poor indicators. They are not responsive to local social, curricular, ethnic, and cultural characteristics. Moreover, they are statistically meaningless measures of the local student population's abilities and potential.

Politicization is another major issue associated with standards for promotion and testing. There the issue hinges on the use of standards to identify schools and school districts that need educational improvement.

As a goal, this identification process seems worthwhile, but as a policy it can penalize the most needy; for in most cases school performance is highly related to resource allocation. This relationship manifests itself in several ways:

- Usually the most resource-poor schools and districts are the ones with the most students below standards. These schools are the ones earmarked as needing improvement and typically they are required to submit and implement improvement plans. Creating and carrying out these plans uses up resources. The consequence of bureaucratic intervention may be less instruction rather than more.

- In some cases, state, local, or federal resources are withheld or reduced when schools and districts fail to meet standards, as has happened in Florida and Pennsylvania. In other cases, schools and districts that do well become eligible for additional resources, as has happened in Texas. Rarely are sufficient resources provided to needy schools or districts to help them support sustained improvement efforts.

- A policy aimed at identifying schools and school districts where students perform below standards, in fact, often results in labeling those schools and districts as sub-standard. In all likelihood, citizens become more reluctant to support such schools and districts.

In education, testing and standards go hand in hand with resource allocation and politics. As noted above, schools and districts whose students are less likely to meet promotion standards may have increased educational costs but may be subject to diminishing resource allocations. Diminishing educational resources can contribute to a situation of diminishing tax revenue and diminished tax revenue affects more than just the public schools. A situation of declining support for education reflects more than just a lack of public confidence in and commitment to the public schools. It reflects lack of public confidence in and

commitment to the community. This often precedes flight from the community and a further reduction of tax revenue. In some communities -- notably inner city communities -- this kind of vicious circle has been the norm. The most common political reaction to this phenomenon is to pressure schools or districts to shape-up. One form this pressure takes is tougher promotion standards and testing programs. Tougher promotion standards are tougher to meet; the failure rate increases and the cycle of decline continues.

Lately, the question has been raised about the impact of testing and standards on raising student achievement or performance levels. As we have already noted, the effectiveness of using testing and promotion standards has not been demonstrated. In some situations, tests and standards seem to have encouraged more stress on achievement in basic skills and may have contributed to higher student achievement levels. There are positive reports from the State of Maryland, Pinellas County, Florida, Austin, Texas, and New York City for example.

On the other hand, few of the forty or so states with uniform standards have had them long enough to ascertain their effectiveness in a statistically reliable way. Moreover, the accuracy of some positive reports--for example New York and Baltimore, Maryland--has been questioned. Most educators, while supporting the intentions of those who favor promotion standards, are cautiously skeptical. Pointing to research that suggests that standards, by themselves, are not enough to boost achievement, these educators recommend that standards and testing be coupled with appropriate remedial programs, staff development, and additional resources. They want to be sure that testing and standards produce more than political rhetoric and pressure.

Testing and Standards in New Jersey and Pennsylvania: Results 1978-1983

Both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have had standards and standardized testing programs since the late 1970s. Although the overall goal of each state program is the identification of student performance levels in specific skill areas, the programs differ in their basic content and approach.

In Pennsylvania, student performance is compared to statewide norms for the goals of Quality Education, and is monitored using a testing program called the Educational Quality Assessment (EQA). The Pennsylvania State Board of Education has linked these goals and the EQA to the state's newly adopted curriculum regulations (Chapter 5), which not only specify courses to be taught, but also set graduation requirements (in terms of numbers of credits, courses, and course hours). Chapter 5 was adopted in November of 1983, so it is still too early to gauge its impact on student achievement. The EQA, however, has been in existence since the 1977-1978 school year and its influence can be summarized.

The EQA consists of 14 subtests linked to Pennyslvania's 12 goals of Quality Education and their associated objectives. It is given every year in grades 5, 8, and 11. It is voluntary to the extent that schools must administer it to students at least once every five years, although local educators can request it anytime within that five-year period. Using the last 5-6 years of EQA results, Research for Better Schools (RBS) examined

student achievement in Pennsylvania. Following are the results of that analysis for basic skills*:

State Student Achievement Trends: Pennsylvania

Subject	Grade Level	Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE)** Changes 78-83
Reading	Elementary	+5
	Intermediate	+1
	Secondary	0
Mathematics	Elementary	+7
	Intermediate	+1
	Secondary	-4

In New Jersey, student performance is measured using a state developed test, the Minimum Basic Skills test (MBS). Administered in all districts each year, the MBS test consisted of reading and math tests given to students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 from 1978 to 1982. In 1983, the state began shifting to a wider ranging graduation proficiency test; therefore, in this transition year, the MBS test was given only to ninth graders and those who previously failed it. RBS' examination of student achievement in New Jersey during the period when MBS testing was in operation produced the following results:

*EQA also tests student performance in a number of unique areas such as citizenship and family living. Results of these tests 1978-1983 are included in the Appendix.

**The Normal Curve Equivalent is a conversion that enables comparison of different test scores to each other and to national averages. The national average NCE is 50 with a score range from 1 to 99. An NCE change of seven or more is educationally significant.

State Student Achievement Trends: New Jersey

Subject	Grade Level	Norman Curve Equivalent (NCE) Changes 78-83
Reading	Elementary	+16**
	Intermediate	+9
	Secondary	+2**
Mathematics	Elementary	+17**
	Intermediate	+11
	Secondary	+6**

It seems clear from these numbers that there have been gains in student achievement in the years since statewide testing was initiated. What, however, are the conclusions to be drawn? Although reluctant to credit the testing and concommitant standards for the gains, RBS investigators did note that testing and standards probably played a role in bringing concentrated improvement efforts into schools where they were needed. And these improvement efforts probably have accounted for the gains in achievement.

On the other hand, the gains declined at each successive grade level, suggesting that improvement efforts were least effective for intermediate and secondary school students. Pointing out the consistency of this finding with similar findings from across the nation, RBS investigators asked whether this situation might require some adjustment in resources or expectations. Another question raised by the decline of scores across the grades is whether promotion standards in these two states will boost gains at these levels or merely add to an already increasing dropout rate.

** Represents 1978-1982 gains as no MBS test was administered at these grade levels in 1983.

Lastly, there is the question of "basic" skills. Both Pennsylvania's Chapter 5 and New Jersey's graduation requirements go beyond the minimum basic skills. Yet both states have gravitated toward basic skills in their improvement efforts. RBS investigators note that these new regulations, as well as long-term achievement trends and post secondary work suggest that there is need to expand state improvement efforts to include more than just reading and math. Also, they point out that, particularly for intermediate and secondary school students, there is a need to go beyond merely introducing standards for promotion to requirements for higher order thinking skills and affective areas. There seems to be a need for programs--particularly in intermediate and high schools--that zero in on teaching in these areas.

Testing and Standards in New Jersey and Pennsylvania: Discussion

With this information as background, the discussion groups focused on four questions related to testing and standards that are of current concern to New Jersey's and Pennsylvania's urban superintendents. These are:

- What, specifically, do promotion standards imply for urban schools, districts, and students?
- What will it take for urban schools to meet the state standards?
- What can be done to make sure district staff, especially teachers, are ready and willing to help their schools and students meet the standards?
- How can urban districts publicize their results favorably and avoid inappropriate comparisons with suburban districts?

Implications of the Standards

First, and foremost, the urban superintendents saw that standards have tremendous implications for remediation. There was some discussion, for instance, of the difficulties of preparing urban students to meet standards set with more affluent students in mind. Many urban students, characterized as the "left side of the bell curve" by one discussant, will have difficulty meeting these standards. Yet, superintendents are confronted with state policies that require every student to meet the standards. So for urban schools, there appear to be two dilemmas: developing programs that help students whose performance levels do not match society's expectations for meeting a set of standards; and providing remediation for the large number of students who, in all likelihood, will not meet the standards. A solution to this dilemma was suggested; one that would reverse the current situation. Install effective programs that would boost the achievement levels of urban students to those of their suburban counterparts, in urban schools. Then institute a set of standards. In short, put the program in place first to protect the student against the possibility of failing to graduate because the standards are set too high.

The discussion then turned to the impact that the new standards might have on the dropout rate in urban schools. Suggesting that tougher standards would create more dropouts, discussants wondered whether the public would tolerate increased numbers of dropouts and whether there is an "acceptable" dropout rate. There was also discussion about the use of jobs to motivate students to stay in school; but it was suggested that the job market in urban areas is both poor and out of a school's control, and therefore, a relatively unreliable motivator.

This discussion, in turn, raised the question of who sets the standards and with whom in mind. Most of the discussants agreed that the average urban student is not the student for whom the new standards were designed. Some expressed disappointment that neither they nor their constituents were consulted sufficiently during development of these standards.

Finally, discussants concluded that the responsibility for helping students meet state promotion standards has to be shared. And this brought them to the next phase of their discussion.

What is Needed to Meet the New Standards

There was nearly consensus that helping students meet standards will require a strong commitment by all leaders in a school district. This commitment can best be demonstrated, in the discussants' opinion, by increasing resources available for educational improvement. They recognized, however, that budget increases would be difficult to negotiate--especially with political bodies like school boards and city governments who were, themselves, unstable and facing fiscal pressures.

There also was agreement that curriculum programs would have to be reexamined, reconceptualized, and possibly redesigned to mesh more effectively with the standards. Concommittant with this need, according to the discussants, is one for staff development and re-training to help teachers link curriculum programs and their instructional strategies to the standards. All of this, of course, will take time and the discussants want to make sure that the public is made aware that it will take more time for urban districts than it will for suburban ones.

Teacher Education and Motivation

The discussants agreed that teachers are the key in any attempt to institute and maintain new standards. Most instructional staff need training to help them understand the standards and tests. They must develop new skills and polish old ones to help students meet the higher standards. Most of all, teachers must be willing to give extra effort to helping urban students meet the standards. In most urban districts, it would be extremely helpful for superintendents to work collaboratively with teachers' unions and associations in order to enhance teacher education and motivation. Such collaborations also would enlarge a district's resources, by lowering the costs for in-service assistance, for example. Staff attitude was seen as vital to the districts' success in helping students meet standards. And here again, discussants saw a significant role for unions and associations: encouraging teachers to "buy into" the districts' efforts.

Publication and Comparison of Results

The major points made here by the discussants were that urban and suburban results will be different and that, in comparison, urban districts will appear less effective in spite of recent and significant improvements. Discussants, however, saw a number of ways to address this problem. Most emphasized better public information the test results and what the achievement levels. in fact, represent. For example, urban districts could:

- undertake campaigns of public information to explain what are reasonable expectations for today's urban students while emphasizing that growth in achievement is as important as scores
- publish test results in clusters of years and use these scores in combination with national data to emphasize student progress over time

- o use the results as a basis for lobbying for a more comprehensive approach to urban education that includes diagnosis, planning, and setting realistic goals as well as tests and standards

- o Work to ensure that the public has a long-range perspective about achievement. Make sure citizens know that success won't come overnight.

Recommendations

From these discussions, the superintendents developed the following recommendations concerning standards of promotion and testing:

1. As part of the state testing process, there should be a campaign of public information and participation to ensure a better understanding of the fundamental issues associated with testing and promotion -- especially in urban schools -- and to guarantee that urban schools and students won't be used as political scapegoats. The association should undertake a lobbying campaign to make sure that legislators also are aware of these issues.

The public should be aware that there is more to education than what goes on in classrooms. They also should realize that schools and teachers in urban areas are often fighting uphill battles. Parental support, peer influence, the social environment, community attitudes, and many other factors affect learning--and by extension performance on standardized tests. And, the public must understand that, typically, high performance and high educational costs go together. They should be helped to see that issues of equity influence test results and that equality of result is not the same as equality of opportunity. More importantly, the public should have a role in setting standards for promotion and graduation. They also should participate in identifying appropriate criteria for promotion. Business and industry, in particular, need to understand the unique situa-

tion which urban schools face and play a larger part in both the decision-making and resource-providing processes.

2. Standards for urban districts should be reasonable and realistic, especially considering the nature of the urban environment, and they should include provisions for support and remediation.

Reality should be the watchword. There should be provision for a variety of ways for urban students to meet promotion and graduation requirements and standards. Intensive summer programs, homework centers, tutoring programs, alternative high schools, industry-education partnerships, and other non-conventional approaches to improving achievement should be encouraged. Judgments should not be based on absolute standards. They should focus more on improvement than on simple concepts of success or failure. Standards should not be punitive in nature. Finally, attendance standards should be established. These standards should be distinguished from achievement standards and addressed separately.

3. Standards for promotion and testing procedures should be basic elements of the district's educational structure, but they should not be the only elements.

Because standards are the official benchmarks of success, they must be incorporated into school goals, curriculum, instructional approaches, management, operating procedures, accountabilities, and so forth. The same is true for standardized tests. Yet, they cannot be the only force behind improvement efforts, as by themselves they are inadequate to ensure students a quality education. Because they are official benchmarks, though, they should be attended to in all grades, subject areas, and programs at all levels throughout the district. District personnel should be kept informed

and involved. And they should be supported in their efforts to help meet the standards by:

- o linking their courses and tests to the standards;
- o designing courses and programs to fit the standards and offering them before instituting the standards;
- o finding additional, perhaps unconventional, resources that contribute to students' achievement;
- o developing remediation and prevention strategies for students; or
- o just doing a good job.

4. Specific alternative programs should be established for students who fail to meet standards -- even after a reasonable amount of remediation.

There is a "catch-22" built into standards in that students who fail to meet them are required to take both required general education courses and remedial courses. The general education courses are the very courses that did not prepare them adequately in the first place. And the time allotted to these courses and remediation may preclude vocational training for students who most need it. Remedial options also should be made more flexible for students who do not meet the standards. Individual Educational Plans seem to work well with other in-need students; the concept might work for those who need special remediation to meet standards. It is vital that all students be prepared for adulthood and careers and that the new standards do not encourage students to simply drop out. If test scores are improved at the cost of denying increasing numbers of students diplomas (and effective access to jobs), little will be gained.

Appendix

State Achievement Trends in Subjects and Areas Other Than Basic Skills: Pennsylvania

SUBJECT/AREA Grade Level	NCE CHANGES 78-83
SELF ESTEEM	
Elementary	+3
Intermediate	+6
Secondary	+9
UNDERSTANDING OTHERS	
Elementary	+4
Intermediate	-2
Secondary	-7
WRITING	
Elementary	+8
Intermediate	+7
Secondary	+1
INTEREST IN SCHOOL	
Elementary	-2
Intermediate	+8
Secondary	+12
SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITY	
Elementary	0
Intermediate	+10
Secondary	-2
KNOWLEDGE LAW/GOVT.	
Elementary	+5
Intermediate	+1
Secondary	+1

HEALTH

Elementary	+8
Intermediate	0
Secondary	+5

CREATIVITY

Elementary	-3
Intermediate	-4
Secondary	-7

CAREER AWARENESS

Elementary	+5
Intermediate	+5
Secondary	0

APPRECIATING HUMAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Elementary	0
Intermediate	+2
Secondary	-11

KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Elementary	-1
Intermediate	-4
Secondary	-15

INFORMATION USAGE

Elementary	+5
Intermediate	+1
Secondary	0

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